

BIOFORTEAN MISCELLANY

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Newspapers can be a fantastic source of leads for cryptozoological investigations, but they also contribute their fair share of fiction and tall tales when it comes to strange creature stories. I've noted before, newspaper stories are folkloric, true or not, and an investigator should be able to discern common folkloric attributes generated by a newspaper article's literary construction. Here are a few different stories from newspapers over the years. Thanks to Richard Muirhead and Rod Dyke for contributions.

First we'll start with stories of giant arachnids. Those are always fun . . . Recently, a *Washington Post* blog story ("On the Maine island of Islesboro, searching for a spider she wasn't sure was real," by Mimi Kirk, June 12, 2014) discussed a story the author saw online about regarding "up-island" spiders, supposedly eight inches across the spread-out legs. Just a local tale, likely misdescribing known spiders, but people have a tendency to promote such exaggerations. So we see . . .

A COLORADO SPIDER STORY

MARION, OHIO, *DAILY STAR*, MAY 8, 1880

A short distance from Buena Vista, says the Leadville (Col.) *Chronicle*, is a cave inhabited by spiders which differ from other spiders in their enormous size, and are quite useful to the needy people of that region. The cave was discovered last December by a party of sight-seers, and the spiders and their work were

witnessed. On entering the cave one is first struck by the funny-looking webs. They are worked like webs of other spiders, but every fiber is ten times as large as the ones woven by ordinary spiders. On passing further into the cave the spiders are encountered. They are about the size of small birds and make a strange sound while weaving their web. Their webs are so tough and the fibers so large that it is almost an impossibility to break down a web.

Some four weeks ago while looking at the cave a miner got to examining the webs. Their strands were about the size of a No. 12 thread, and he thought that they could be used for thread. Having a needle in his possession he broke off one of the strands and found that it fitted the needle. Sewing on a loose button to test the efficacy he found it as strong as silk thread, and that it answered his every purpose. Since then the people have flocked in and carried away hosts of the webs, but the spiders do not appear to object in the least. There is some talk among capitalists of starting a thread factory there and using the webs for thread.

No surprise, this is an early “nature faker” article, just a brief wacky story to amuse the readers. The same story was re-run in newspapers across the country in 1882 and 1891. But, this isn’t the end of it. A newspaper writer brushes off the old story and puts a new spin on it.

COLORADO’S MONSTER SPIDERS

GOSHEN, INDIANA, *DAILY DEMOCRAT*, JUNE 1, 1901
Prof. E. T. Laughton has returned to his home in New York after spending the winter in exploring the mountains near Buena Vista and investigating the habits of a species of monster spiders found in the Middle Cottonwood pass.

Little definite is known of these spiders, says the *Sun*, but around them has been gathered a mass of Indian legend and prospectors' yarns that rival those of Munchausen. Many years ago these spiders lived in a cave easily reached by tourists. It was in a valley two miles northeast from Harvard City, then a thriving mining camp eight miles west of Buena Vista.

In 1830 a man named Shultz cut his way into the spiders' den. He did not return and a week later a searching party found his body partly buried in the spiders' cave under a mass of fallen rock. As it would have required considerable timbering at an expense of several hundred dollars to recover the body, and as the man had no known relatives, it was left undisturbed. Shultz's skeleton is still in the cave, but the spiders have found another home farther back in the mountains.

Some of the tales told about these spiders are given in an old letter which has just been found in Buena Vista. It says:

"A short distance out of Buena Vista there is a cave swarming with spiders of immense size, some of them having legs four inches in length and bodies as large as that of a canary bird. The cave was discovered in 1868 and was often visited by pioneers on their way to California, who obtained their webs for use in the place of thread.

"Early and late the cave resounds with a buzzing sound emitted by the spiders as they weave their webs. The webs were tested in '71 and found to be composed of silk of the finest quality. The skins of the spiders make good gloves, as they are pliable and require no tanning.

"A number were captured and tamed, and manifested great affection for all members of the family. They were far superior to a cat in exterminating rats

and mice, following their prey into the holes in the walls and ceilings. One spider, kept as pet by a Buena Vista lady, used to stay all night at the head of her bed acting as sentinel.”

Since giant killer spiders also make a good story, they do pop up occasionally in newspaper fiction. This next one is a good example of newspaper cryptofiction.

MONSTER OF ISSOIR

BUCKS COUNTY, PA, *GAZETTE*, AUGUST 23, 1894

For many years it is undeniably stated that in the fourteenth arrondissement of Paris—called the tomb of Issoir—a number of persons living in that quarter had mysteriously and periodically disappeared. The most careful researches, the most minute inquiries, the most skillful agents of the police had failed to discover the least trace of them.

Every year successively some inhabitants of this quarter would suddenly disappear, leaving their friends overwhelmed with grief and anxiety. It is also stated that these strange, inexplicable facts always occurred in the early spring—from the 20th to the last of March—and without regard to age or sex.

First a notary disappeared. It was thought he had used his client's funds and fled to parts unknown. Then an old woman, returning late one night from market, was the next victim, then a laborer going home from work. The last victim had been a young girl—a flower maker out late delivering her goods. From that time she had as completely disappeared as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up. Strange to say, no children had been among the victims.

This peculiar fact was accounted for in this way. These mysterious disappearances always occurred late at night, when the children were at home asleep.

As the time was drawing near for one of these periodical mysteries the chief of police became very anxious and instituted a strict surveillance, confiding the matter to a number of the most skillful of his assistants, hoping the combined efforts of so many zealous agents would surely be crowned with success. You will now see the result.

One night—this fact can be verified by applying to the office of the prefecture—a policeman about 8 o'clock in the morning heard a distant musical song, which seemed to come from the bowels of the earth. He listened and fancied the sounds came from an opening in the center of the street, at the foot of an enormous rock called the tomb of Issoir, or the Giant's cave.

It may be interesting to state that this rock derived its name from a legend that a great giant had been buried there many years before the Christian era, and this rock had been placed there to mark the tomb.

Surprised at this strange discovery—for the opening had never been noticed before—the policeman waited, listening to this peculiar song, when he suddenly saw a young man approaching. He knew from his costume that he was a countryman lately arrived in the city. This young man also seemed to hear the subterranean sounds, first walking slowly with a peculiar wavering step, as if in cadence with this musical chant, then faster and faster as he drew near the fatal rock, until he ran with such velocity that in spite of the warning cries of the policeman he was swallowed up in this mysterious opening. Without taking a moment to consider the policeman recklessly followed, first firing his revolver and giving one or two vigorous blasts on his whistle.

At this signal several of his comrades quickly arrived. The musical chanting had ceased, but they

could hear in the dark, cavernous depths the muffled sounds of a desperate struggle.

By the aid of ropes and ladders they succeeded in entering this mysterious chasm. The light of their lamps revealed a sickening sight.

The countryman was lying on his back writhing in the grasp of an unknown monster, whose horrible aspect froze the agents of police with terror.

It was as large as a full grown terrier, covered with wartlike protuberances and bristling with coarse brownish hair. Eight jointed legs, terminated by formidable claws, were buried in the body of the unfortunate victim. The face had already disappeared. Nothing could be seen but the top of the head, and the monster was now engaged in tearing and sucking the blood from his throat.

As soon as they recovered from their horror and surprise a dozen balls struck the body of this sanguinary beast.

He raised up on his legs, a greenish, bloody liquid flowing from his wounds, and, with a frightful cry, expired.

The first policeman, who had given the alarm, was lying unconscious in one corner of the cavern, where he had fallen, a distance of 30 feet.

It was with great difficulty they succeeded in removing the two bodies and the unknown monster from the cavern. The poor countryman was dead, but the policeman was soon restored to life.

The agents immediately sent for the commissioner of police, who summoned a naturalist in great haste.

The first established the identity of the victim; the second declared the creature lying before him was a gigantic spider. The species had been considered extinct for centuries—ever since the days before the

deluge. It was called “Arachne gigans” and was said to have the power of enticing its victims by a peculiar musical song. None had been seen or heard of for ages, but it is now believed some of these sanguinary beasts still exist in the deepest galleries of the catacombs.

The dead body of the spider was conveyed to the Museum of Natural History, where it was carefully prepared and stuffed and is now on exhibition.

From cryptofiction, we can move directly to tall tales . . .

NOSTALGIC EX-PROSPECTOR YEARNING FOR CANYON-NAVIGATING FLYING FISH

OMAHA, NEBRASKA, *WORLD HERALD*, APRIL 6, 1946

Thermopolis, Wyo. (UP)—Now comes the flying fish. Nature lists a species of air-minded members of the finny tribe, but not the type which Albert (Bigfoot) Trumbull has in mind.

Bigfoot may be recalled as a prospector in north-central Wyoming back about 30 years ago. He is remembered chiefly for his tale of the wild hare, or Wilbur, his pet jackrabbit, which leaped a canyon from rim to rim after taking a swig of panther milk.

Now residing in Tonopah, Nev., Bigfoot got to brooding over the flying fish he used to catch around Birdseye Pass. [H]e learned that the season opened in Wyoming on April 1.

So he wrote a letter to Ken Byerly, editor of the Thermopolis Independent-Record, explaining that he'd be much obliged if Mr. Byerly would inform him whether “there are still flying fish on Copper Mountain.”

While he was prospecting out of Thermopolis Bigfoot said, he used to almost live off of “them flying fish in the summer.”

“Every night before dark, I used to go up to Birdeye Pass when the fish would be flying up through there from the headwaters of Grass Creek to the headwaters of Tough Creek on the Shoshoni side.

“I’d catch them fish with a long-handled frying pan just as they was flapping through the pass. Had my best luck if I put grease in the pan.”

Sometimes, Bigfoot recalled, it would be cloudy, with a low ceiling, and that was when he really caught them. That’s when the long-handled frying pan really got a workout.

He hasn’t seen any flying fish in Nevada, Bigfoot said. He related that he asked “one of them warden fellers” the other day what the limit was on flying fish.

The game official looked sort of startled. Finally, he addressed Bigfoot:

“Friend, as near as I can figure it, the sky is the limit on flyin’ fish in Nevada.”

So Bigfoot gave it up, convinced that there were no flying fish in Nevada. That’s when he wrote Mr. Byerly.

From fish tales, we go to “snake” stories:

*THE SYDNEY GAZETTE AND NEW SOUTH
WALES ADVERTISER, NOVEMBER 29, 1822*

An Australian Monster.—A powerful sensation has lately been created in the town of Liverpool, by a report of a dreadful monster having been seen in its vicinity, and to satisfy the mingled feelings of alarm and incredulity which had spread among the inhabitants, two men came before the Magistrates, and voluntarily made affidavit, that they had seen in the bush, about two miles and a half out of town, a

tremendous snake, which, to the best of their belief, was at least forty five feet in length, and three times the circumference of the human body!!! The man who first beheld it, thinking it might be dead, threw a stick at it when it reared its monstrous body five feet from the ground. A third person, who also had witnessed this frightful spectacle, offered to corroborate, on oath, the depositions laid before the Court; but it was judged that two affidavits formed a testimony quite sufficient. Actuated at once by curiosity and alarm, a party of respectable Gentlemen, with attendants, went in quest of this extraordinary object; but succeeded only in finding its track, which exhibited the impression of immense scales, and fully confirmed the reports concerning its tremendous dimensions. Some have conjectured that it must be a species of crocodile, from a mark in the earth fourteen inches long, which appeared to have been indented by a portion of its jaw. We are informed that every exertion is now making to find out this fearful monster, and to put an end to its horrid existence. For the satisfaction of public curiosity, we shall feel obliged by communications from any of the Gentlemen residing on the spot.

While giant reptiles are par for the course in early newspaper stories, it is a little surprising to find a precursor to the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* . . .

CLEAR LAKE MYSTERY

GRAETTINGER, IOWA, *TIMES*, JULY 16, 1914

Clear Lake, June 29.—What has been termed by the summer colony as the “Human Fish” has been discovered on the north shore of Clear Lake and is causing more excitement than has prevailed at this summer resort for a number of years. The discovery of

the strange phenomenon was brought about by cottagers who had food taken off their piers which run into the lake and the statement of a number who declare they have seen the strange creature. Several parties have gone out in an effort to catch the mysterious visitor but each effort has been, up to date without result.

A few nights ago a party of guests at the Oaks Hotel went down to the lake beach and started in an all night vigil in an effort to capture it. Just at midnight when the lights went out about the pier, a ripple in the water was seen and a human arm was extended out of the water. It grabbed some food which had been placed on the end of the pier and was again withdrawn into the water. The watchers rushed to the pier end but they saw nothing. However, a dark spot away out in the lake near 100 yards away was seen hurrying thru the water and a weird laugh was heard rippling over the water.

Some fisherman who were out in a row boat last Thursday claim to have seen what they took to be a man swimming with fish-like speed thru the water. They gave chase in their boat but as they neared the man or animal it dove and similar laughter was heard from the rushes which were about fifty yards away.

It is believed that the strange inhabitant of the lake, is either a sea monster which has by some method found a home in the lake or else it is a demented man whose love for swimming has caused him to spend most of his time in the water, getting his food from the piers and cottages and sleeping like Moses of old, in the bull rushes along the lake's shore. The proximity of the county home between Clear Lake and Mason City where a number of unfortunates are housed, led to an investigation and it was found that there are none of the inmates missing.

Instead of solving the mystery the solutions seemed farther away.

Hunting the human fish has become a pastime with the colonists. The description given by those who claim to have seen it describe it as a small sized man about fifty years of age and whose body seemed to be covered with scales like a fish, caused perhaps by the roughening of his skin by constant staying in the water. Others claim it impossible for the creature to be a man because of the long time it stays under water. However, every effort is being made to solve the mystery and motor launch loads of people can be seen daily skirting the lake looking for the strange creature whose mysterious visits have so aroused the summer colony.

Just as many historical "wild man" reports were of misidentified homeless people, this could be a possible explanation here. More strange are the "kathobs" of Texas folklore . . .

ANNUAL HUNT FOR GHOULS OF PADRE ISLAND AGAIN FAILS

SAN ANTONIO, TX, *EXPRESS*, MARCH 12, 1939

Corpus Christi, March 11.—The seventh annual "kathob" fleet sailed from Flour Bluff Sunday afternoon for a two-weeks' expedition down the Laguna Madre in search of the grave-robbing mammals who are supposed to come out of hibernation on the first fall moon before the vernal equinox each year. Only 10 men, instead of the customary 12, volunteered to make the cruise this year in search of the mysterious mammal.

Searched for by the National Geographic Society, innumerable fishermen and sportsmen, the "kathob" so named by the fisherfolk along the lagoon, is believed to be a cross-breed of the Pinnipedia group,

resembling a large seal, but having short, thick legs instead of flippers. Reported for many years by Mexican fishermen, it was not only until seven years ago that anything similar to the description of the mammal was found. Capt. B. P. Roberts, conducting a fishing party in the lagoon, brought to the surface a ferret-shaped head, resembling a seal's, while using a cast net gathering bait. The head, quite decomposed, substantiated somewhat the reports of the kathobs and a year later two scientists, accompanied by Roberts, went down the lagoon in search of the strange creature.

HEAR CROAKS

The party reported hearing the low, guttural croaks of the kathobs from the lee side of the island across the lagoon and attempted several times to get close enough to see what was making the sounds but failed to find anything except the three-toed tracks in the sands which fitted the descriptions heard for several years as being those of a "kathob." The tracks were radically unlike those of any animal, or mammal, resembling the kathob. Each report has substantiated the other in description. For years the fisherfolk along the lonely reaches of the lagoon have told of the kathobs which they say are only seen in the summer and never during the colder months. No connection has yet been made between the appearance of the kathobs and the first full moon before spring except that the waters are warmer at that time and the lagoon more plentiful with fish.

FIFTEEN IN HERD

The herd of kathobs has been reported to number about 15. No one has ever been able to get close enough to them because the herd is so difficult to

see as it lies floating in the shallow waters, heads above the water. Fishermen say the head is of a greenish-blue color and has very small eyes.

Other tales of the creatures, which have been reported both on land and water, describe them as being approximately four feet in length and resembling a big seal, except that they have short legs and have straggly fur over most of the body except the head and shoulders. Each foot has three toes, rather blunt but having very sharp claws and slightly webbed.

They live on both land and water but remain in the water most of the time, burrowing into holes in the side of a mud bank during the winter, according to the fishermen. In the warm weather they lie far out in the lagoon, and can be heard on still nights from the land side making a guttural, croaking noise.

The fishermen are indignant because so many people believe the kathob is a myth and want county officials to do something about trying to get rid of the herd. It was formerly much larger, according to older reports.

Those fishermen who are too poor to own boats and must fish by wading and using a cast net, religiously remain in their camp on still summer nights when fish are reported running on the lee side of Padre Island because of the reports of the kathobs.

According to tales heard for the past 15 years, the kathobs seldom attack anything in the water but have been known to prey on small animals and even calves on shore. Reported as an accidental death two years ago, fisherfolk still believe that the death of a Mexican fisherman near the lee side of the island was caused by an attack from one of the mysterious kathobs. They refuse to believe that the man's death was caused by falling backwards on a gilling knife

when he tripped over some net but say that the slash on his back was made by the sharp, rasp-like tongue of a kathob, similar to a mark found on the back of a calf near the spot two days previous. Examination of the calf's back, fishermen said, revealed that the wound had been made near the spinal column and the spinal fluid drawn out by the kathob's rasp-like tendril. The kathobs have never been known to eat anything but fish, according to reports along the lagoon.

Fishermen also want the county to exhume most of the bodies buried in a small graveyard near the lagoon to prove that the strange animals are the graveyard ghouls stories during the past years say they are.

In the event of a death in the small fishing colonies along the lagoon, the body is moved as soon as possible into Corpus Christi.

Approximately 17 years ago a nearly extinct cross-breed of the seal was reported in Hudson Bay that resembled the "kathobs." It is believed that the mysterious seal-like kathobs may be of a similar family and are probably on the way to extinction.

Thoroughly disgusted with previous attempts to secure public aid in securing a real specimen of the small kathob herd, fishermen discuss the tale very little but have for the past seven years sent a crew down the lagoon on each first full moon before the vernal equinox to search for the kathob herd.

The "kathob" story is interesting. Upon first reading, I thought it might simply have been created out of thin air by the journalist (which was not uncommonly done to fill space). I did contact the National Geographic archive library to see if they had anything on an expedition to Padre Island, but there was nothing in their records. However, I came across another article from April 26,

1964, in the San Antonio *Express* that again discusses this alleged creature (copyright prevents reprinting here). It appears to be local folklore of the “gravedigger” variety (an animal that burrows into graveyards), with a treasure-protection motif. There might have been an additional article published in the 1930s on “kathobs” that included a fabricated skeleton, but it doesn’t seem to have been digitized. I suspect further details could lie in historical papers of that region, worth exploring.

From one sea creature to another, though, we jump to a small carnivore once known to have existed (probably; there’s a little bit of debate, but genetic analysis suggests it was a distinct species) until hunted to extinction. Unlike certain other species (Caribbean monk seals, ivorybill woodpeckers, etc.), we don’t see many alleged sightings of sea minks in recent years, so it was interesting to run across this article.

SEA MINK MAY NOT BE EXTINCT

OLGA BURNS

HAYWARD, CA, *DAILY REVIEW*, JULY 11, 1961

A coat of sea mink is undoubtedly nearly as rare today as a necklace of hen’s teeth, but 30 years or so ago there were still one or two fur pieces that were reliably said to be made from the pelt of the giant mink.

For years now most naturalists have written off the sea mink of Maine and the Maritime Provinces as extinct, but since mink skins of a light reddish color and better than half again as large as those of the ordinary mink were still appearing on the market as late as the 1870’s, it may well be that not all of these remarkable animals were caught by trappers.

So far as is known today, the main differences between the sea mink and other kinds lay in the larger size and a coarser coat, plus a somewhat different coloration.

The habitat was not especially different from that of other varieties, or rather the ordinary mink was also found in salt marshes and along the coast just as much as his giant relatives were. Furthermore, the sea mink was also often trapped along fresh water streams well inland, although in general it was found near the coast and on the offshore islands.

And right there lies one of the better reasons why the sea mink may still be very much alive today. With the controlled trapping that has been going on in Maine for many years, and with the vast numbers of islands, plus its many bays and estuaries, it is not only probable but even likely that some of these big fellows still exist.

On several occasions in recent years various persons have reported seeing mink on the Maine coast and two or three times on the islands, many of which are uninhabited. On none of these occasions, so far as is known, have the surprised observers been able to do more than note that the animals were mink. Under the circumstances there was no chance for comparison with an animal of ordinary size.

The following story seems like a typical newspaper "sea monster" tale, but the careful reader may recognize that something else is going on:

THING THAT FLOGS WHALES

BOSTON, MA, DAILY GLOBE, NOVEMBER 28, 1904

While operating a fishery in Admiralty Island, Alaska, last summer, my attention and the attention of the fishing crew was almost daily attracted to a large marine creature that would appear in the main channel of Seymour canal and our immediate vicinity.

There are large numbers of whales of the species rorqual there and the monster seemed to be their

natural enemy. The whales generally travel in schools, and while at the surface to blow one would be singled out and attacked by the fish, and a battle was soon in order.

It is the nature of the rorqual to make three blows at intervals of from two tot three minutes each, and then sound deep and stay beneath the surface for 30 or 40 minutes.

As a whale would come to the surface, there would appear, always at the whale's right side and just about where his head would connect with the body a great long tail or fin, "judged by five fishermen and a number of Indians, after seeing it about 15 times at various distances," to be about 25 feet long, 2 ½ feet wide at the end and tapering down to the water, where it seemed to be about 18 inches in diameter, looking very much like the blade of the fan of an old-fashioned Dutch windmill.

The great club was used on the back of the unfortunate whale in such a manner that it was a wonder to me that every whale attacked was not instantly killed.

Its operator seemed to have perfect control of its movements, and would bend it back until the end would touch the water, forming a horseshoe loop, then with a sweep it would be straightened and brought over and down on the back of the whale with a whack that could be heard for several miles.

If the whale was fortunate enough to submerge itself before the blows came, the spray would fly for a distance of 100 feet from the effect of the stroke, making a report as loud as a yacht's signal gun.

What seemed most remarkable to me was that, no matter which way the attacked whale went, or how fast (the usual speed is about 14 knots), that great club would follow right along by its side and

deliver those tremendous blows at intervals of about four or five seconds.

It would always get in from three to five blows at each of the three times the whale would come to the surface to blow. The whale would generally rid itself of its enemy when it took its deep sound, especially if the water was 40 fathoms or more deep, but at night the whales would be attacked in the bay and within 400 yards of the fishery.

I do not know of any whales being killed, but there were several that had great holes and sores on their backs.

Questioning the Indians about it, I was told that there was only one, that it had been there for many years, and that it once attacked an Indian canoe, and with one stroke of the great club smashed the canoe into splinters, killing and drowning several of its occupants.—Forest and Stream.

No, that's no sea monster. Rather, it's the mistaken (and exaggerated) identification of whale genitalia. This is not the only case of a "sea serpent attacking a whale" that likely involves a sexually-excited cetacean.

Finally, here is an interesting piece of zoological folklore that Richard Muirhead came across in a Google Books scan of *Narrative of the Second Arctic Expedition* (GPO: Washington, D.C., 1879), the edited journal of Charles F. Hall's expedition to King William Island in search of remnants from Sir John Franklin's lost expedition:

"A peculiar animal was described to Hall, an account of which is scarcely to be found in Arctic books. The natives speak of it as being larger than the bear, and as very ferocious and much more difficult to be killed. It has grayish hair, a long tail, and short, thick legs, its fore feet being divided into three parts like

the partridge's; its hind feet are like a man's heels. When resting, it sits upright like a man. A Neitchille Innuït, crawling into a hole for shelter in the night, had found one sound asleep and quickly dispatched it with his knife. It may be added here that Ebierbing, now residing in the United States, confirms such accounts of the 'Arc-la,' and says that the animal once inhabited his native country on Cumberland Sound."

Richard also notes that the Buryat people of Siberia have folkloric beasts/dragons called *Arakho* and *Alklha* (*Giants, Monsters and Dragons: An Encyclopaedia of Folklore, Legend and Myth* by Carol Rose, 2000), which may or may not have an etymological relationship with the *Arc-la*. It's tempting to add this to stories of alleged surviving giant ground sloths (there are other tales of such from certain northern provinces), but at present it simply is an odd but unconfirmable sketch of a folkloric beast.